

The Almost Christian.

A

S E R M O N

ON



A C T S xxvi. 28.

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This Sermon is not to be fold, but given away.

L O N D O N:

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ACTS xxvi. 28.

Almost thou persuadest Me to be a Christian.

AND many there are who go *thus far*: ever since the Christian Religion was in the world, there have been many in every age and nation, who were *almost persuaded to be Christians*. But seeing it avails nothing before God, to go *only thus far*, it highly imports us to consider,

First, What is implied in being *almost*,

Secondly, What in being *altogether a Christian*.

I. 1. Now, in the being *almost a Christian* is implied, first, Heathen Honesty. No one, I suppose, will make any question of this: especially since by Heathen Honesty here, I mean, not that which is recommended in the writings of their philosophers only, but such as the common Heathens expected of one another, and many of them actually practised. By the rules of this they were taught, that they ought not to be unjust; not to take away their neighbour's goods, either by robbery or theft: not to oppress the poor, neither to use extortion toward any; not to cheat or over-reach either the poor or rich, in whatsoever commerce they had with them: to defraud no man of his right, and if it were possible, to owe no man any thing.

2. Again, the common Heathens allowed, that some regard was to be paid to Truth as well as to Justice. And accordingly, they not only held him in abomination, who was forsworn, who called God to witness to a lye; but him also who was known to be a slanderer of his neighbour, who falsely accused any man. And indeed little better did they esteem wilful liars of any sort, accounting them the disgrace of human kind, and the pests of societies.

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3. Yet again, there was a sort of love and assistance which they expected one from another. They expected whatever assistance any one could give another without prejudice to himself. And this they extended not only to those little offices of humanity, which are performed without any expence or labour; but likewise to the feeding the hungry, if they had food to spare, the clothing the naked with their own superfluous raiment; and in general the giving to any that needed, such things as they needed not themselves. Thus far (in the lowest account of it) Heathen Honesty went, the first thing implied in the being *almost a Christian*.

II. 4. A second thing implied in the being *almost a Christian*, is the having the form of godliness, of that godliness which is prescribed in the gospel of Christ; the having the *outside of a real Christian*. Accordingly the *almost Christian* does nothing which the gospel forbids. He taketh not the name of God in vain; he blesteth and curseth not; he sweareth not at all, but his communication is, Yea, yea; Nay, nay. He profanes not the day of the Lord, nor suffers it to be profaned, even by the stranger that is within his gates. He not only avoids all actual Adultery, Fornication, and Uncleaness, but every word or look, that either directly or indirectly tends thereto; nay, and all idle words, abstaining both from all detraction, backbiting, tale-bearing, evil-speaking, and from *all foolish talking and jesting*, *Ευφρανσις*, a kind of virtue in the Heathen Moralists's account. Briefly, from all conversation that is not good to the use of edifying, and that consequently grieves the holy Spirit of God, whereby we are sealed to the day of redemption.

5. He abstains from *Wine wherein is excess*, from revellings and gluttony. He avoids, as much as in him lies, all strife and contention, continually endeavouring to live peaceably with all men. And if he suffer wrong, he avengeth not himself, neither returns evil for evil. He is no railer, no brawler, no scoffer, either at the faults or infirmities of his neighbour. He does not willingly

willingly wrong, hurt, or grieve any man, but in all things acts and speaks by that plain rule, *Whatsoever thou wouldst not he should do unto thee, that do not thou to another.*

6. And in doing good, he does not confine himself to cheap and easy offices of kindness, but labours and suffers for the profit of many, that by all means he may help some in spite of toil or pain. *Whatsoever his hand findeth to do, he doeth it with all his might:* whether it be for his friends or for his enemies, for the evil or for the good. For, being not slothful in this, or in any *Business*, as he hath opportunity he doeth good, all manner of good to all men: and to their souls as well as to their bodies. He reproveth the wicked, instructs the ignorant, confirms the wavering, quickens the good, and comforts the afflicted. He labours to awaken those that sleep; to lead those whom God hath already awakened, to the fountain opened for sin and for uncleanness, that they may wash therein and be clean; and to stir up those who are saved through faith, to adorn the gospel of Christ in all things.

7. He that hath the form of godliness, uses all the means of grace, yea, all of them and at all opportunities. He constantly frequents the house of God; and that not as the manner of some is, who come into the presence of the Most High, either loaded with gold or costly apparel, or in all the gaudy vanity of dress; and either by their unseasonable civilities to each other, or the impertinent gaiety of their behaviour, disclaim all pretensions to the form, as well as to the power of godliness. Would to God there were none even among ourselves, who fall under the same condemnation: who come into his house, it may be, gazing about, or with all the signs of the most listless, careless indifference, though sometimes they may seem to use a prayer to God for his blessing on what they are entering upon: who, during that awful service, are either asleep, or inclined in the most convenient posture for it; or as tho'

they supposed God was asleep, talking with one another, or looking round, as utterly void of employment. Neither let these be accused of the form of godliness. No, he who has even this, behaves with seriousness and attention, in every part of that solemn service. More especially when he approaches the table of the Lord, it is not with a light or careless behaviour, but with an air, gesture, and deportment which speaks nothing else, but *God be merciful to me a sinner.*

8. To this, if we add, the constant use of family prayer, by those who are masters of families, and the setting times apart for private address to God, with a daily seriousness of behaviour; he who uniformly practises this outward religion, he has the form of godliness. There needs but one thing more in order to his being *almost a Christian*, and that is, *Sincerity.*

(III.) 9. By Sincerity I mean, a real, inward principle of religion, from whence these outward actions flow; and indeed, if we have not this, we have not *Heathen Honesty*; no, not so much of it as will answer the demand of a *Heathen, Epicurean Poet.* Even this poor wretch, in his sober intervals, is able to testify,

* *Oderunt peccare boni, virtutis amore;
Oderunt peccare mali, formidine pœnæ.*

So that if a man only abstains from doing evil, in order to avoid punishment,

† *Non pascet in cruce corvos,*

Saith the Pagan; there, *Thou hast thy reward.* But even he will not allow such a harmless man as this, to be so much as a *good Heathen.* If then any man from the same motive, viz. to avoid punishment, to

* Good men avoid sin from the love of virtue; wicked men avoid sin from the fear of punishment.

† Thou shalt not be hanged,

avoid

avoid the loss of his friends, or his gain, or his reputation, should not only abstain from doing evil, but also do ever so much good, yea, and use all means of grace; yet we could not with any propriety say, this man is even *almost a Christian*. If he has no better principle in his heart, he is only a hypocrite altogether.

10. Sincerity therefore is necessarily implied in the being *almost a Christian*: a real design to serve God, a hearty desire to do his will: it is necessarily implied that a man have a sincere view of God in all things; in all his conversation; in all his actions; in all he does or leaves undone. This design, if a man be *almost a Christian*, run thro' the whole tenor of his life. This is the moving principle both in his doing good, his abstaining from evil, and his using the ordinances of God.

11. But here it will probably be enquired, Is it possible that any man living should go so far as this, and nevertheless be *only almost a Christian*? What more than this can be implied in the being a *Christian altogether*? I answer, first, That it is possible to go thus far, and yet be but *almost a Christian*, I learn not only from the oracles of God, but also from the sure testimony of experience.

12. Brethren, great is my boldness toward you in this behalf. And forgive me this wrong, if I declare my own folly upon the house-top, for yours and the gospel's sake. Suffer me then to speak freely of myself, even as of another man. I am content to be abased, so ye may be exalted, and yet to be more vile, for the glory of my Lord.

13. I did go thus far for many years, as many of this place* can testify. Using diligence to eschew all evil, and to have a conscience void of offence. Redeeming the time, buying up every opportunity of doing good to all men; constantly and carefully using all the public and all the private means of grace: endeavouring after a steady seriousness of behaviour, at all times and in all places: and God is my record, before whom I stand, doing all this

* The University of Oxford.

in sincerity; having a real design to serve God, a hearty desire to do his will in all things, to please him who hath called me to *fight the good fight*, and to *lay hold of eternal Life*. Yet my own conscience beareth me witness in the Holy Ghost, that all this time I was but *almost a Christian*.

II. If it be enquired, what more than this is implied in the being *altogether a Christian*? I answer,

1. First, the Love of God. For thus saith his word, *Thou shalt love the Lord thy God, with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind, and with all thy strength*: such a love of God is this, as engrosses the whole heart, as takes up all the affections, as fills the entire capacity of the soul, and employs the utmost extent of all its faculties. He that thus loves the Lord his God, his spirit continually rejoiceth in God his Saviour. His delight is in the Lord, his Lord and his all, to whom in every thing he giveth thanks. All his desire is unto God, and to the remembrance of his name. His heart is ever crying out, *Whom have I in heaven but thee, and there is none upon earth that I desire beside thee*. Indeed what can he desire beside God? Not the world, nor the things of the world, for he is crucified to the world, and the world crucified to him. He is crucified to the desire of the flesh, the desire of the eye, and the pride of life. Yea, he is dead to pride of every kind. For love is not puffed up; but he that dwelleth in love, dwelleth in God, and God in him; he is less than nothing in his own eyes.

2. The second thing implied in the being *altogether a Christian* is, The love of our neighbour. For thus said our Lord in the following words, *Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself*. If any man ask, who is my neighbour? we reply, Every man in the world; every child of him, who is the Father of the spirits of all flesh. Nor may we in any wise except our enemies, or the enemies of God and their own souls. But every Christian loveth these also as himself; yea, as Christ loved us. He that would more fully understand what manner of love this is, may

may consider St. Paul's description of it. It is long-suffering and kind. It is not puffed up, but maketh him that loves, the least, the servant of all. Love doth not behave itself unseemly, but becometh all things to all men. She seeketh not her own, but only the good of others, that they may be saved. Love is not provoked: it casteth out wrath, which he who hath, is not made perfect in love. It thinketh no evil. It rejoiceth not in iniquity, but rejoiceth in the truth. It covereth all things, believeth all things, hopeth all things, endureth all things.

3. There is yet one thing more that may be separately considered, tho' it cannot be actually separate from the preceding, which is implied in the being altogether a Christian: and that is the ground of all, even FAITH. Very excellent things are spoken of this throughout the oracles of God. Every one, saith the beloved disciple, that believeth, is born of God. To as many as received him, gave he power to become the sons of God, even to them that believe on his name. And this is the victory that overcometh the world, even our Faith. Yea, our Lord himself declares, He that believeth in the Son, hath everlasting life; and cometh not into condemnation, but is passed from death unto life.

4. " But here let no man deceive his own soul.* It is diligently to be noted, the Faith which bringeth not forth repentance, and love, and all good works, is not that right living Faith which is here spoken of, but a dead and devilish one. For even the devils believe, That Christ was born of a virgin, that he wrought all kinds of miracles, declaring himself very God: that for our sakes he suffered a most painful death, to redeem us from death everlasting: that he rose again the third day; that he ascended into heaven, and sitteth at the right hand of the Father, and at the end of the world shall come again to judge both the quick and the dead. These articles of our Faith the devils believe, and so they believe all that is written in

* Homily on the Salvation of Man.

the Old and New Testaments. And yet for all this Faith they be but devils. They remain still in their damnable estate, lacking the very true Christian Faith."

5. "The right and true Christian Faith is, (to go on in the words of our own church) not only to believe that holy scripture, and the articles of our Faith are true, but also to have a sure trust and confidence, to be saved from everlasting damnation by Christ. "It is a sure trust and confidence which a man hath with God, that by the merits of Christ his sins are forgiven, and he reconciled to the favour of God,—whereof doth follow a loving heart, to obey his commandments."

6. Now, whosoever has this faith, which *purifies the heart*, by the power of God, who *dwelleth therein*, from pride, anger, desire, *from all unrighteousness*, from *all filthiness of flesh and spirit*, which fills it with love stronger than death, both to God and to all mankind: love that doth the works of God, glorying to spend and to be spent for all men, and that endureth with joy, not only the reproach of Christ, the being mocked, despised and hated of all men, but whatsoever the wisdom of God permits the malice of men or devils to inflict; whosoever has *this Faith thus working by love*, is not *almost* only, but *altogether* a Christian.

7. But who are the living witnesses of these things? I beseech you, brethren, as in the presence of that God, before whom *hell and destruction are without a covering*; how much more the *hearts of the children of men*! That each of you would ask his own heart, "Am I of that number? Do I to far practise justice, mercy, and truth, as even the rules of Heathen Honesty direct? Have I the form of godliness? Do I abstain from evil, from whatsoever is forbidden in the written word of God? Do I, whatever good my hand findeth to do, do it with my might? Do I seriously use all the ordinances of God at all opportunities? And is all this done with a sincere design and desire to please God in all things?"

8. Are

8. Are not many of you conscious, that you never came thus far? That you have not been even *almost a Christian*? That you have not come up to the standard of heathen honesty? At least, not to the form of christian godliness? Much less hath God seen sincerity in you, a real design of pleasing him in all things. You never so much as intended to devote all your words and works, your business, studies, diversions, to his glory. You never even designed or desired, that whatsoever you did, should be *done in the name of the Lord Jesus*, and as such, should be a *spiritual sacrifice to God thro' Christ*.

9. But supposing you had, Do good desires and good designs make you a Christian? By no means: unless they are brought to good effect. "Hell is paved, saith one, with good intentions." The great question of all then still remains, Is the love of God shed abroad in your heart? Can you cry out, "My God, and my all?" Do you desire nothing but him? Are you happy in God? Is he your glory, your delight, your crown of rejoicing? And is this commandment written in your heart, that he who loves God, love his brother also? Do you love every man, even your enemies, even the enemies of God, as your own soul? As Christ loved you? Yea, dost thou believe that Christ loved *thee*, and gave himself for thee? Hast thou faith in his blood? Believeest thou the Lamb of God hath taken away *thy* sins, and cast them as a stone into the depth of the sea? That he hath blotted out the hand-writing that was against *thee*, taking it out of the way, nailing it to his cross? Hast thou indeed redemption thro' his blood, even the remission of *thy* sins? And doth his Spirit bear witness with *thy* spirit, that thou art a child of God?

10. The God and the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who now standeth in the midst of us, knoweth that if any man die without this faith, and this love, good it were for him that he had never been born. Awake, then, thou that sleepest, and call upon thy God: call in the day when he
may

may be found. Let him not rest, till he makes his goodness to pass before thee, till he proclaim unto thee the name of the Lord, the Lord, the Lord God, merciful and gracious, long-suffering and abundant in goodness and truth: keeping mercy for thousands, forgiving iniquity, transgression and sin. Let no man persuade thee by vain words, to rest short of the prize of thy high calling. But cry unto him day and night, who while we were without strength died for the ungodly, until thou knowest in whom thou hast believed, and canst say, "My Lord and my God." Remember always to pray, and not to faint, till thou also canst lift up thy hand unto heaven, and declare to him that liveth, for ever and ever, "Lord, thou knowest all things, thou knowest that I love thee."

11. May we all thus experience what it is to be not almost only, but altogether a Christian! Being justified freely by his grace, thro' the redemption that is in Jesus; knowing we have peace with God through Jesus Christ; rejoicing in hope of the glory of God, and having the love of God shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Ghost given unto us!

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